



# ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE & RACISM EXPLORATORY RESEARCH

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**ENVIRONICS**  
RESEARCH



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# Applying a social equity lens to environmental issues is increasingly important for eNGOs. How do we best communicate with Canadians on this emerging priority?

Exploratory qualitative research was needed to understand what people know (or don't know) about environmental racism and environmental justice, what perceptions they hold and why they feel this way. This learning serves as a foundation for future public campaigns and communications.



# RESEARCH METHODS

**Environics Research conducted eight focus groups between August 8-15, 2023. Discussions took place *prior* to the evacuations of Kelowna and the Northwest Territories due to forest fires.**

Number of groups	Toronto (in-person)	Vancouver (in-person)	Atlantic region (online)	French Quebec (online)	Total
Non BIPOC	1	1	1	2	5
BIPOC	1	1	1	-	3

Groups were segmented by race/ethnicity to create a safe space in which to have these conversations. In-person groups were held to encourage engagement with the subject matter.

BIPOC participants were recruited based on self-identification as Indigenous, Black or a visible minority or person of colour. Indigenous participants were included (n=4) but a different approach will be needed if future research is to consider Indigenous perspectives specifically.

All participants were also recruited to reflect a variety of ages, genders, education and income levels. Those who are “not at all concerned” about environmental issues were excluded (screened out).

In Quebec, one group was held in Montreal and one outside Montreal (both in French).

Further details are provided in the Appendix.

# KEY TAKE-AWAYS

1

## **Environmental vulnerability=socioeconomic (more than race)**

The concept of unequal impacts and environmental vulnerability makes sense to Canadians, but they link it mainly to socioeconomic status (low incomes) rather than race.

2

## **Environmental justice connects; environmental racism divides**

“Env racism” does not resonate well because of the tendency to think of racism at the individual rather than the systemic level. “Env justice” resonates more because it is solutions-oriented and linked to holding our institutions (justice system, governments, corporations) accountable.

3

## **The social justice-oriented were most accepting of the concepts**

Reactions ranged from positive to negative among both BIPOC and non-BIPOC, suggesting their views are not solely influenced by race/ethnicity.

4

## **Need to amplify affected parties**

Build understanding through direct, empathetic and inclusive messages and give those directly affected the opportunity and means to have their say.

# WHO IS AFFECTED BY ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES?

## Context

# What environmental issues are top of mind?

Climate change and global warming are most widely identified as the top environmental issues facing Canada today. Related, but often distinctly mentioned, are extreme weather events and inconsistent weather patterns. Participants' concern for these issues is their frame of reference when discussing how environmental issues affect different groups of people.



**Climate Change  
Global Warming**



**Wildfires &  
Extreme Weather**



**Air & Water  
Pollution**



**Safe Drinking  
Water**

Other mentions included fracking, transitioning to renewable energy sources, recycling, fast fashion, overconsumption and littering.

*NOTE: Focus group discussions took place before the evacuations in Kelowna and Northwest Territories.*

# Who is affected by environmental issues

## Are some Canadians more vulnerable than others?

Participants initially expressed difficulty describing the type of person who would be more vulnerable to environmental impacts. Once drawn into the discussion they often described lower income individuals, especially those in remote locations. Other demographic factors were listed less frequently.

### Most Vulnerable Groups



#### Low income or poor households

Income was seen as the biggest determinant of how people can respond to and recover from environmental threats. Lower incomes represent lack of access to resources – options like installing AC or moving or travelling to somewhere more comfortable are out of reach and other unforeseen costs might not be affordable.



#### Remote and rural households

Canadians living in Northern, remote, and coastal locations were seen as more vulnerable compared to those in big cities. Being closer to the water or forested areas increases the likelihood of being directly impacted, while being more isolated or living in less densely populated areas was seen to affect political clout and the ability to respond to potential impacts. Some participants specifically mentioned that Indigenous people living on reserves or in more rural areas may be more impacted.

### Other Vulnerable Groups



**Elderly**  
**Medical issues/health conditions**



**Refugees, newcomers, and immigrants to Canada**  
**Indigenous People**



**Homeless**  
**Single parent households**  
**Large families**



# Who is affected by environmental issues

## Is race seen to connect to vulnerability?

**Race and ethnicity were not key themes when discussing vulnerability.**



**Race is not as evident and not as obviously connected compared to income or other inequities.**

Although income levels and lower socioeconomic status were key themes when discussing vulnerability, very few participants made the connection that racialized people are more likely to be low income.

*“I don’t think race is the main factor here. I think it comes down to access to resources (income) and the support network.” - Non BIPOC, Vancouver*



**Race makes more sense to participants in the Indigenous or global context (Global North vs South).**

Race and racism came up when considering Indigenous people in Canada and disparities in other countries, but there was pushback on whether it otherwise exists in Canada.

*“This makes me think of Indigenous People – sometimes they come to the City or the government for help and are faced with racism.” BIPOC, Vancouver*

*“Some areas more affected, e.g., Pakistan. Southern countries more affected, less affected in the north. In the north, we can mitigate the impacts with AC” – Non BIPOC, Quebec*



**Most BIPOC participants did not see themselves being differently impacted due to their identity.**

BIPOC people themselves did not identify situations where they have personally been unequally impacted by environmental issues – the concept made sense in theory but didn’t ring a bell for them.

*“I don’t think climate change affects me more.” BIPOC, Vancouver*

# ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

## **Awareness & Misconceptions**

# Environmental Racism

## Snapshot of Reactions



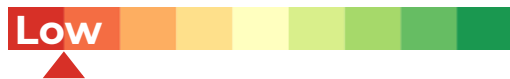
### Awareness



Environmental Racism was a new term/concept for nearly all participants.



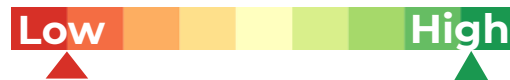
### Understanding



Before seeing any definitions, it was difficult for participants to define and think of concrete examples on their own.



### Acceptance



Acceptance of the polarizing term ranged from low to high.

# Environmental Racism

## Awareness & Understanding

### Awareness: Low

**Environmental racism was a new term/concept for nearly all participants. Nonetheless, there is interest in discussing the topic and its nuances.**

Very few participants (5 out of 52 participants) heard the term prior to the focus groups. Notably, these five participants all work in academia or as public servants, in fields like social work where discussions of social justice are more common. One social work professor mentioned their students are requesting more content on the connection between climate change and social justice. Of these five participants, only one identifies as BIPOC.

### Understanding: Low

**The term is not intuitive. Many participants struggled to think of examples and this discussion often led to debates about what racism means in this context.**

Most definitions centered around the idea that environmental issues can impact people of colour and other groups more than others. It was difficult for participants to come up with specific examples of environmental racism, but a couple provided examples like locations of dump sites or work sites. Some participants immediately thought of Indigenous communities.

*“We all contribute to climate change but some groups are more affected than others.” – Atlantic BIPOC*

*“Some races are more affected by environmental conditions. Asian countries are more exposed to the effects of pollution than we are here. Perhaps African countries are more affected by heat waves?” – Montreal Non BIPOC*

# Environmental Racism

## Definition shown to participants

### Definition

Environmental racism occurs in Canada and around the world. It happens when development, policies or practices intentionally or unintentionally result in more pollution or health risks in Indigenous and racialized communities. We also see it in patterns of unequal access to environmental benefits like clean water and air and proximity to parks. Environmental racism has serious impacts on health and well-being.

### Examples

- Locating industrial sites and other environmentally hazardous projects near racialized (including Indigenous) communities.
- Higher levels of toxic chemicals in certain consumer products (i.e., chemical hair straighteners and skin lighteners) marketed to racialized Canadians.
- Higher levels of toxic chemicals in workplaces (i.e., farms, tanneries, industrial chemical manufacturers, etc.) dominated by racialized workers.
- Inadequate environmental standards or enforcement for polluting industries/companies operating near racialized communities.
- Lack of opportunities for communities to participate in the decisions that affect their environment and health.

# Environmental Racism

## Acceptance

Acceptance: **Low** to **High**

**After providing a definition, acceptance of environmental racism varied across groups. Some questioned whether the correct term has been chosen. The word ‘racism’ elicits strong reactions that may distract from the core issue or alienate large groups.**

As a new topic for most participants, willingness to accept the definition provided varied by group. Acceptance was highest in the Atlantic provinces where participants felt the term accurately describes the issues at hand (which might be a function of Bill C-230 – a bill aimed at addressing environmental racism – being discussed in Nova Scotia, creating a heightened profile of the issue in the Atlantic provinces). Greatest pushback was seen in the bigger cities – the Toronto non BIPOC group and both Vancouver groups.

Overall, non BIPOC participants were most likely to feel defensive or antagonized by the term environmental racism because for some, ‘racism’ is a charged word – it inherently implies ‘white people versus everyone else.’ This dynamic sparked debates about whether the term ‘racism’ has been wrongly applied to environmental topics, and whether environmental racism even exists which takes the focus away from the actual issue. In the French groups, some participants who initially agreed inequalities exist changed their minds, saying these issues affect everyone equally.

Some participants felt the bold term could be an advantage – it grabs attention and can become a tool to call out corporations.

*“Who wants to be  
called an  
environmental racist?  
That’s a strong  
statement.”  
- BIPOC Participant,  
Toronto*



# Environmental Racism

## Mental Barriers & Misconceptions

### **Misconception 1 – Role of Intent: ‘It’s not about race, it’s coincidental’**

Some Non BIPOC participants believe the location of industrial sites and other environmentally hazardous projects is purely a cost/financial driven decision. Their rationale often includes phrases like: “if a white or non marginalized community was located in the most economical spot for the project, companies would still operate there. It’s not about race.”

### **Misconception 2 - Role of Diversity: ‘It doesn’t affect all racialized Canadians.’**

BIPOC participants, especially those in Vancouver found it difficult to envision themselves or their peers as victims of environmental racism. Their rationale is that the areas they live in and their communities are so culturally diverse that it is difficult to imagine race being the basis for unequal impacts. They believe environmental racism exists but felt more comfortable viewing Indigenous people as victims of environmental racism and mentioned that grouping Indigenous and racialized communities together dilutes the issue. These participants also tend to view racism and environmental issues as separate rather than overlapping.

### **Misconception 3 - Role of Inclusivity: ‘Exclusion of non BIPOC people facing these issues’**

Some participants in both BIPOC and non BIPOC groups felt that the term ‘environmental racism’ is too narrowly focused and should be more inclusive. They felt it overstates the role of race and that these disproportionate impacts are largely impacted by other factors. ‘Environmental discrimination’, ‘environmental classism’, and ‘environmental inequity’ were proposed as ‘softer’ alternatives.

# ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

## **Awareness & Misconceptions**

# Environmental Justice

## Snapshot of Reactions



### Awareness



Environmental justice is not widely known but seemed more familiar.



### Understanding



Participants felt more comfortable providing examples, even without prior knowledge of the term.



### Acceptance



Relatively high acceptance after seeing the actual definition with some skepticism about feasibility.

# Environmental Justice

## Awareness & Understanding

### Awareness: Low to Moderate

**Some participants said they heard the term before.**

Awareness of environmental justice is higher than environmental racism. Participants were more likely to say they have seen the term online or in the media.

### Understanding: Moderate

**Participants were fairly likely to correctly guess the core concept without prior knowledge.**

When asked to define the term environmental justice, participants often connected environmental justice to the idea that we need to protect everyone from climate change. A key theme was the justice system – many definitions mentioned legal implications and compensation. There was a clear association between environmental issues and holding organizations accountable or encouraging them to take responsibility. Participants often mentioned government's role/responsibility in achieving environmental justice.

Some participants saw a clear link between environmental racism and environmental justice, however this connection was not always intuitive to participants, even after reading the definitions of both terms.

# Environmental Justice

## **Definition shown to participants**

### **Definition**

Some underprivileged, racialized and Indigenous communities bear an unfair burden of environmental damages and risks. Environmental justice is the act of bringing these injustices to light, and developing and implementing measures — tools, strategies and policies — to address them. Environmental justice includes access to nature and waste management.

# Environmental Justice

## Acceptance

### Acceptance: **Moderate** to **High**

**Acceptance of environmental justice is quite high among participants. Any hesitancy or skepticism is linked to general pessimism about climate solutions, rather than pushback on the actual concept/term.**

Most participants felt environmental justice is a softer, more inclusive, and solutions-oriented term. Even those who hadn't previously heard the term typically got the impression it involves an important and noble mission. Compared to environmental racism, this term was less jarring. Negative feedback stemmed from pessimism that we can solve issues like climate change because it can be challenging for people to understand and envision equitable solutions.

*"It's a utopian ideal, I don't see it happening in my lifetime." BIPOC participant Atlantic*

*"Definition felt too narrow, based on environmental racism, thought it was bigger than that." BIPOC participant Atlantic*

*"It makes sense. I see it as a response to some of the issues we talked about. The government should be implementing these actions, making this happen. If they don't take action, we're all going to suffer – doesn't matter what race." NON BIPOC participant, Toronto*

*"Environmental justice is for everyone, not just racialized people, not just indigenous people." Non BIPOC Participant, Quebec*



# Environmental Racism & Justice

## Should this topic be a key focus?

Although some participants place a high level of importance on the topic, many participants see environmental racism as a topic that divides us in a fight we should be united in.

With the current framing, participants in both BIPOC and Non BIPOC groups expressed mixed views about whether this topic should be a central focus.

### Low Importance:

*"It's not an important or urgent matter"*  
– Non BIPOC Toronto

*"Let's try and keep race and colour out of it and let's talk about the cone of good. What's good for everybody in the long run is good for everybody. Just talking about it is frustrating."*  
– Atlantic BIPOC

### Moderate Importance:

*"If we raise awareness, what are we going to do about it?" – BIPOC, Toronto*

*"It's a good thing to talk about it. But I'm afraid people will forget the enviro side and focus on racism, forgetting the environment" – Non BIPOC, Montreal*

### High Importance:

*"I can't see another way around it because it does exist, and we need to address it."*  
– Atlantic BIPOC

*"It's completely necessary to be aware of it but we are inundated with so much info and propaganda so it's hard to discern...what's important. The way it's written seems like it could be politicized."*  
– Vancouver Non BIPOC

# Environmental Racism & Justice

## What role for environmental groups?

**“Environmental groups can start the movement”, a participant from Montral said.**

When we asked participants **who** should raise awareness about environmental racism and justice and **how**, they pointed to the key role of environmental NGOs in **amplifying the voices of marginalized people who are unfairly impacted**.

### How?

Participants emphasized:

- Simple, empathetic and non-divisive messages
- Concrete examples
- Hearing the stories from those affected in their own words

*“Hearing it just from the environmental groups is one thing but hearing it from people who are actually affected by it would pack more of a punch. If we hear directly from marginalized people, in conjunction with the environmentalists, I think it would have a much better impact.”*  
– Non BIPOC Atlantic

### Who else?

#### Governments

- Fund environmental organizations
- Run impactful advertising campaigns
- Integrate the concepts into environmental education in schools
- Above all, act on their words

#### Social justice organizations

- Partner with environmental groups to amplify the voice of people affected.

#### Media, Academics, Political movements

- Bring the topic into the public sphere (articles, etc.), echoing the work of environmental organizations that discuss inequality, racism and justice.



# Closing Thoughts

## Communicating about environmental justice

“

“There’s no way around sugar coating it. It exists and its here. What needs to be done by eNGOs is be ready to have these uncomfortable conversations. I didn’t know about it before so there needs to be some education of this is what we mean by environmental racism and this is what it looks like in Canada.

**SOURCE:** BIPOC PARTICIPANT, ATLANTIC

“

“‘Environmental racism’ doesn’t seem to be inclusive. The message is about raising awareness on environmental issues and how some groups are disproportionately affected. But tonight, I’m hearing reaction to the term ‘racism’, which means the message isn’t getting through as easily. Talking about ‘environmental justice’ maybe rallies more people. But in the medium-long term, it would be important to be able to talk about ‘environmental racism’ too.”

**SOURCE:** NON-BIPOC PARTICIPANT, QUEBEC

# RECOMMENDATIONS

# Recommendations

## Build public awareness in two phases:

1

### **First focus on educating the public on the concept of unequal impacts**

Thinking about environmental issues from a social justice perspective is new for many Canadians and does not come naturally unless other factors like income and geographic location are mentioned. Get buy-in by starting with the basics rather than starting with environmental racism.

*Alternate terms proposed: “climate gap” “environmental discrimination”  
“environmental injustice” “environmental inequality”*

2

### **Build on their understanding of vulnerability by adding the BIPOC lens**

Once the public is more familiar with the concept of environmental vulnerability, it will be easier for them to understand the racial element and why the BIPOC perspective is important when considering environmental impacts.

# Recommendations (continued)

## How to build empathy in both phases of awareness campaigns:



### Identify the terminology that resonates best with the public

- Test different terms to prevent alienating the uninformed public.
- Avoid academic language or terms that read as overly 'woke'.
- Focusing on environmental justice/injustice could help rally broader support.



### Share concrete examples of different types of injustice

- Share examples of how real people are affected by environmental injustice in Canada to show it happens here.
- Examples (like in the environmental racism definition) make it easier to understand a complex topic.



### Amplify the voices of people who are unfairly impacted

- Be careful not to speak for racialized Canadians or Indigenous people, but rather support and provide them with the platform to share their experiences.
- Messages on this topic are more credible when shared by BIPOC voices.



### Use a more local and tailored approach to campaigns

- Target examples by region/city so that campaigns hit closer to home and feel more relevant.
- Consider collaborations with organizations representing BIPOC communities in the regions of interest.



# Thank you.

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# APPENDIX

# GROUP COMPO- SITION

In August 2023, Environics Research conducted eight focus groups across the country with a total of n=52 Canadians including those who identify as racialized or a visible minority (BIPOC), and those who do not (Non BIPOC) using the following breakdown:

## In-Person Focus Groups (6-8 participants per group)

Group 1: Toronto  
Non BIPOC (n=8)

Group 2: Toronto  
BIPOC (n=6)

Group 3: Vancouver  
BIPOC (n=6)

Group 4: Vancouver  
Non BIPOC (n=7)

## Online Focus Groups (5-8 participants per group)

Group 5: Atlantic  
region Non BIPOC  
(n=5)

Group 6: Atlantic  
region BIPOC (n=6)

Group 7: Montreal  
Non BIPOC (n=8)

Group 8: Quebec  
(excluding Mtl) Non  
BIPOC (n=6)

Each focus group discussion lasted 1.5 hours. The discussion guide was created with input from EcoAnalytics members and used existing definitions of environmental racism and environmental justice to generate feedback. In-person focus groups were conducted at research facilities while online focus groups were conducted over Zoom. Quebec sessions were conducted in French.

Note: the results of qualitative research should be viewed as indicative rather than projectable to the population (as measured in a quantitative study).

# Racisme environnemental

Le racisme environnemental existe au Canada et dans le monde entier. Il se produit lorsque le développement, les politiques ou les pratiques entraînent, intentionnellement ou non, davantage de pollution ou de risques pour la santé dans les communautés autochtones ou racisées. Nous l'observons également dans des schémas d'accès inégal aux bienfaits environnementaux, comme l'eau potable, l'air pur et la proximité des parcs. Le racisme environnemental a de graves conséquences sur la santé et le bien-être.

# Des exemples de racisme environnemental

- Sites industriels et autres projets dangereux pour l'environnement installés à proximité de communautés racisées (y compris autochtones).
- Concentrations plus élevées de produits chimiques toxiques dans certains produits de consommation (p. ex., défrisants chimiques et produits éclaircissant la peau) commercialisés auprès de personnes racisées.
- Concentrations plus élevées de produits chimiques toxiques dans les lieux de travail (p. ex., fermes, tanneries, fabricants de produits chimiques industriels, etc.) dominés par les travailleuses et travailleurs racisés.
- Normes environnementales inadéquates pour les industries ou entreprises polluantes en activité près des communautés racisées ou application inadéquate de celles-ci.
- Manque d'occasions pour les communautés de participer aux décisions qui touchent leur environnement et leur santé.

# Justice environnementale

Certaines communautés supportent un fardeau inéquitable et disproportionné de dommages et de risques environnementaux, parce qu'elles sont défavorisées, racisées, autochtones. Ce qu'on appelle la justice environnementale est la mise en lumière de ces injustices, et un ensemble de mesures (outils, stratégies et politiques) pour s'y attaquer. La justice environnementale inclut l'accès à la nature et la gestion des matières résiduelles.